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## Literary Arabic and the Syrian dialect: Functional distribution and language attitudes in Syria

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**Abstract.** The study is devoted to analyzing the current problem of diglossia in the Arab world, in particular in the Syria. The main issue facing the researchers concerns the establishment of the actual status and functional load of literary Arabic (LA) and its dialects in the conditions of their coexistence, as well as the identification of sociolinguistic factors that determine the choice of language variant in various communicative situations. The purpose of the study is to identify trends in the use of both LA and its dialects, and to determine native speakers' attitudes towards each of these language varieties. Data were collected via a sociological survey of 1,010 respondents, predominantly from the Syria, and analysed using statistical methods. The key results indicate the persistence of diglossia, where dialects prevail in the everyday sphere, and LA is used in the official sphere. A decrease in the use of LA is observed among the younger generations. Despite the widespread use of dialects in everyday life, most respondents remain unwilling to support their recognition as full-fledged languages, which is a consequence of the existing and persistent ideology.

**Keywords:** Arabic language, diglossia, linguistic situation, language representations, social representations, language policy, code-switching

**Conflict of interest.** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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# Литературный арабский и сирийский диалект: функциональное распределение и языковые аттитюды в Сирии

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**Аннотация.** Исследование посвящено анализу актуальной проблемы диглоссии в арабском мире, в частности в Сирии. Основной вопрос, стоящий перед исследователями, касается установления фактического статуса и функциональной нагрузки литературного арабского языка (ЛА) и его диалектов в условиях их сосуществования, а также выявления социолингвистических факторов, которые определяют выбор языкового варианта в различных коммуникативных ситуациях. Цель исследования — выявление тенденций использования ЛА и его диалектов и определение отношения носителей к каждому из указанных вариантов языка. Материалы исследования получены путем проведения социологического опроса среди 1010 респондентов, абсолютное большинство которых из Сирии. Для оценки эмпирических данных использовались методы статистического анализа. Ключевые результаты указывают на сохранение диглоссии, при которой использование диалектов преобладает в бытовой сфере, а ЛА — в официальной сфере. Наблюдается снижение использования ЛА среди младших поколений. Несмотря на широкое использование диалектов в повседневной жизни, большинство респондентов остаются неготовыми поддерживать их признание в качестве полноценных языков, что является следствием существующей и устойчиво закрепленной идеологии.

**Ключевые слова:** арабский язык, диглоссия, языковая ситуация, репрезентации языка, социальные представления, языковые установки, языковая политика

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## Introduction

In the Arab world, language policy is closely linked to the preservation and development of literary language — Literary Arabic (LA) against the backdrop of dialect usage in everyday communication. It is believed that the literary language is utilized in education, legislation, and official documentation, emphasizing its central role in the cultural and social life of the region. However, colloquial var-

variants of the language are also penetrating official spheres; when transitioning to the literary form, speakers often demonstrate phonetic features of the colloquial variant (Abuhakema, 2013: 175).

Language is a social phenomenon that evolves alongside the society in which it exists. However, the literary language, as a unifying factor for the countries of the Arab East, is losing its relevance and cultural-linguistic continuity, its invariability in the context of everyday communication requires more detailed examination (Fatkhullova, 2012: 24).

Dialects, characterized by a high degree of variability, reflect socio-cultural realities and adapt to contemporary conditions, including borrowings from other languages and the influence of new technologies. Thus, dialects become more dynamic and susceptible to change, in contrast to LA even in terms of the most stable language levels (Rogers, 1879; Brustad, 2000; Younes, 2015).

Some scholars contend that the core of the diglossic challenge for example in Egypt is not inherent to the diglossia itself, but rather to the persistence of CA, which some intellectuals perceive as a contributing factor to Arab underdevelopment. But in the end, they conclude that CA's enduring strength, stemming from its intrinsic link to the Quran, renders its supplantation exceedingly difficult (Ibrahim, 1986: 115; Al-Huri, 2015).

Nevertheless, a growing body of research actively pursues the descriptive documentation of Arabic dialects as autonomous linguistic systems. These investigations emphasize the inherent grammatical and phonological coherence of individual dialects, often revealing complex linguistic structures distinct from Literary Arabic (Al-Wer, 1997: 251).

The official language of Syria is Arabic. However, as one of all Arab countries Syria mirrors the linguistic landscape, which is characterized by diglossia. Numerous studies have explored the characteristics of diglossia. Academics as Charles A. Ferguson and his successors laid the groundwork for understanding diglossia as a phenomenon characterized by the co-existence of “high” and “low” linguistic varieties (Ferguson, 1959; Ferguson, 1996; Hudson, 2002; Yacoub, 2015).

Literary Arabic is used in the official sphere: governmental institutions and media, and it is often viewed as a unifying force amongst Arabic speakers. Alongside LA, various dialects function and exhibit significant variation across all linguistic levels, differing based on geographical region. These dialects serve as the primary means of communication in everyday life. In addition to Arabic, minority languages such as Kurdish, Armenian, and Syriac are spoken among various ethnic groups within the country.

Language policy in Arab countries, particularly in Syria, aims to strengthen the position of Literary Arabic, as evidenced by the establishment of specialized institutions dedicated to the Arabization of loanwords. In the Arab world, there are at least

five language academies: the Arabic Academy in Damascus, founded in 1919; the Academy of the Arabic Language in Cairo, established in 1932; the Iraqi Academy, founded in 1947; the Academy of the Arabic Language in Jordan, created in 1976; and the Academy of the Arabic Language in Libya and Algeria, which is currently non-functional (Bassiouney, 2020).

The idea of establishing an Arabic language academy first emerged in Syria and later in Egypt in the early twentieth century. The primary goals of all Arabic academies are to preserve the Arabic language and develop it to meet the needs of society in all fields. The academies also address issues related to the development and standardization of scientific terminology and the Arabization of terminology from other languages when borrowed (Tuleubaeva, 2019).

The Damascus Academy began with the following objectives (Bassiouney, 2020):

1. Simplifying literature to make it accessible to the masses.
2. Establishing a national public library.
3. Developing technical and scientific terms.
4. Publishing scientific journals in Arabic.
5. Supporting scientific research in Arabic.

In 2001, the academy declared the necessity of unifying technical terms across the Arab world and sought methods to simplify the grammar of literary Arabic. During that period, the academy aimed to encourage Syrians to use the literary language more broadly, including its application in everyday life, as well as to find means and methods to curb the spread of dialects.

Mazin al-Mubarak a scholar and member of the Academy of the Arabic Language in Damascus, called for the enhancement of the status of Literary Arabic and the gradual eradication of dialectal usage in conversational speech in Syria. His proposed plan aimed at eliminating colloquial expressions in Syria included a series of initiatives, such as informational programs for families designed to assist parents in addressing challenges related to the implementation of LA at home; ensuring that children could read and learn effectively; promoting the use of LA in media; increasing the production of songs, plays, and films in LA; and encouraging children's competitions for writing poetry, novels, and short stories in LA. His ideology may align with the political agenda of Syria and the belief in the slogan "one nation, one language." However, the practical implementation of this ideology faces significant challenges, given that dialects serve as the primary mode of communication for Syrians in various contexts, including home, group interactions, and schools (except in Arabic language classes (al-Mubarak, 1979: 5).

**The aim of research** is to determine the role of dialects and LA in various aspects of life for Arabic speakers.

## Methodology and methods

To achieve the aim, it is essential to identify the factors that influence the choice of language variant in different communicative situations and to explore the relationship between socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, place of residence) and attitudes toward dialects and the literary language.

A questionnaire was developed that includes both open-ended and closed-ended questions. These questions are designed to uncover attitudes toward dialects and LA, as well as perceptions of their functions (language of everyday communication, language of education, language of culture, language of religion), language behavior (language choice in various communication situations, frequency of use of dialect and LA), and the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. The sample of respondents was stratified by age, gender, education, and place of residence, employing random sampling methods.

Data analysis involved processing the survey data using statistical analysis software and comparing the obtained information. Throughout the research, consent was obtained from the respondents to participate in the survey, and their anonymity was ensured.

The survey included the following questions:

1. Can you speak Literary Arabic as fluently and for as long as you can in your dialect?
2. Do you use Literary Arabic in your daily life?
3. In what situations do you use Literary Arabic?
4. What is your opinion on the use of Literary Arabic in everyday life?
5. Which language variant do you use on social media and while communicating online?
6. Do you think that dialects should become official languages alongside Arabic?
7. Explain your answer to the previous question.
8. Do you believe that dialects should replace Arabic as the official language?
9. Explain your answer to the previous question.
10. How different is your dialect from literary Arabic?

## Study and results

The results of the study indicate the following:

1. In the situation of notable diglossia dialects play a crucial role in the lives of Arabic speakers and serve as the primary means of communication.
2. Older generations and school students do not have problems in using LA, while middle-aged individuals face challenges in communicating in LA.
3. In general, there is a decline in the quality and frequency of use of the literary form of the language.

4. Despite its important role, which was acquired on the basis of a certain ideology, literary Arabic still functions only in official spheres.

5. Despite the prevalence of dialects, Arabic speakers are not ready to recognize them as full-fledged languages. The reluctance to recognize dialects as official languages does not depend on age or gender; responses were mixed across all demographics.

6. Perception of Dialect Similarity: The majority of Arabic speakers believe that their dialect differs only slightly from LA, with a small percentage considering that their dialect and LA are virtually indistinguishable.

## Discussion

For clarity, the data are presented in two formats: absolute quantitative figures (n) are provided in the tables, while percentage values (%) are given in the text. The analysis of the survey responses revealed the following information about the respondents:

The total number of participants was 1,010, including 76.3% women and 23.7% men (Table 1<sup>1</sup>). 93.4% of respondents were from Syria, while 6.6% were from other Arab countries (Table 2). When analyzing the survey results, it was decided to include all responses, even though the research focus was on the Syrian dialect and its relationship to Literary Arabic. This choice is justified by the small percentage of respondents from other countries/regions, the similar linguistic situation in terms of the functional and symbolic distribution of Literary Arabic and the dialect, as well as the very design of the questionnaire, which is valid for any Arabic-speaking region.

Table 1

### Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	N	Proportion, %
M	239	23.7
F	771	76.3
All	1010	100

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

Table 2

### Geographic Distribution of Respondents

Country	N	Proportion, %
Syria	944	93.4
Jordan	18	1.7

<sup>1</sup> The table shows absolute frequencies (N) and their corresponding percentages (%). Here and hereafter, this specific format, combining counts and percentages, is used selectively in the following sections only where the proportional breakdown is crucial for the analysis.

Ending tabl. 2

Country	N	Proportion, %
Palestine	18	1.7
Lebanon	6	0.59
Egypt	6	0.59
Tunisia	5	0.49
Sudan	3	0.2
Iraq	3	0.2
Yemen	3	0.2
Algeria	2	0.19
Saudi Arabia	2	0.19
All	1010	100

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

Table 3 summarizes the sample's composition by age. The data reveals a pronounced concentration in early adulthood: nearly 83% of all participants are under the age of 40. This demographic bias must be acknowledged, as attitudes, behaviors, and experiences captured herein are primarily reflective of a younger population segment (Table 3).

Table 3

### Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group	N	Proportion, %
Under 19	69	6.83
18–29	657	65.04
30–39	179	17.72
40–49	72	7.21
50 and older	33	3.2

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

In response to the question “Can you speak Literary Arabic as fluently as you can in your dialect?”, 63.86% of respondents answered positively, while 36.13% answered negatively. Among women, 63% answered positively, while 37% answered negatively. Among men, 67% answered positively, and 33% negatively (Table 4).

Table 4

**Gender Distribution of Responses to Question 1**  
**“Can you speak Literary Arabic fluently as you can in your dialect?”**

Gender	N	
	Positive	Negative
M	160	79
F	485	286
All	645	365

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

When asked, “Do you use Literary Arabic in your daily life?” 5% of respondents answered positively; 41% responded “sometimes”; and 54% answered negatively (Table 5).

Table 5

**Gender Distribution of Responses to Question 2**  
**“Do you use Literary Arabic in your daily life?”**

Gender	N		
	Yes	No	Sometimes
M	23	110	106
F	29	437	305
All	52	547	411

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

Among the positive responses, 28 individuals aged 18–29, 14 aged 30–39, 6 aged 40–49, and 4 aged 50 and older responded affirmatively, while no respondents under 18 answered positively. The vast majority of respondents across all age groups report never or only sometimes using LA daily. This underscores a gap between the symbolic status of LA and its practical application in daily contexts (Table 6).

Table 6

**Age Distribution of Responses to Question 2**  
**“Do you use Literary Arabic in your daily life?”**

Age Group	N		
	Yes	No	Sometimes
Under 18	0	31	35
18–29	28	365	267
30–39	14	105	60

Ending tabl. 6

Age Group	N		
	Yes	No	Sometimes
40–49	6	38	28
50 and older	4	8	21

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

Subsequently, participants were asked about their usage of Literary Arabic across various common scenarios. The question, “In what situations do you use literary Arabic?” presented a range of situations where Arabic speakers often find themselves needing to employ LA, allowing participants to select multiple options. The most frequently chosen situations, ranked by prevalence, were: within educational settings, for formal documentation, in professional contexts, when communicating with speakers of different Arabic dialects, during official gatherings, and in interactions with non-Arabic speakers. Some participants also opted for the “all of the above” response. Interestingly, a segment of the respondents indicated that they never utilize LA. Among those who selected “other,” the most common scenarios provided included communicating with children, using LA for ironic effect, and employing it during public speaking engagements (Table 7).

Table 7

### Question 3 “In what situations do you use literary Arabic?”

Situation	N
Education	548
Work	234
Communication with speakers of other dialects	181
Communication with foreigners	106
Documents	301
Official meetings	178
All of the above	40
Never	133
Other	64

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

Regarding language use in online communication and social media, the overwhelming preference was for dialectal Arabic, chosen by 88% of participants (887 individuals), while Literary Arabic was selected by only 12% (123 individuals). No discernible patterns related to age were identified, as both the youngest and oldest respondents were represented in both language-choice groups.

Concerning attitudes toward the use of LA in daily life, the most frequent response was “neutral,” accounting for 40% of the participants. Positive opinions were held by 31%, while 13% indicated that they “find it amusing.” A smaller percentage (9%) viewed the use of LA as indicative of high social status, 4% responded negatively, and 2% selected the “other” category (Table 8). The “other” category in the survey included a variety of opinions: a 16-year-old female respondent expressed optimism about the likelihood of using the literary language in everyday life, however, she indicated that she considers it impossible for it to be widely used. A 20-year-old man claims that LA does not exist, since it is not actually used by native speakers. Moreover, the respondent believes that daily use of LA will lead to unsuccessful speech communication.

Table 8

**Question 4 “What is your opinion on the use of Literary Arabic in everyday life?” — Attitudes**

Response	N
Positive	318
Neutral	409
Negative	36
I find it amusing	136
I consider it a sign of high status	94
Other	17

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

The data revealed a divergence of views on the official recognition of dialects along with LA: a significant proportion of participants (76%) aged 12 to 68 years opposed granting dialects official status. However, some respondents (24%) aged 13 to 70 years supported the idea of official recognition of dialects. Thus, no age-related trends were identified (Table 9).

Table 9

**Question 6 “Explain your answer to the previous question” — Recognition of Dialect as an Official Language Alongside LA**

Response	N	Proportion, %
Yes	242	24
No	768	76

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

In Question 6, “Explain your answer to the previous question” respondents favoring the teaching of dialects frequently cited their ease of use and accessibility (48 individuals) as key factors. A larger number justified their preference by emphasizing the widespread use of dialects and their relevance to the contemporary, fast-paced lifestyle (111 individuals), characterizing dialects as “the language of everyday life.” A smaller group (15 individuals) pointed out that dialects embody and transmit cultural values. A few residents of Damascus specifically asserted that their dialect forms an integral part of the Syrian linguistic identity. Other justifications included subjective aesthetic judgments such as “the dialect is more beautiful” and expressions of personal preference like “I like my dialect,” while a significant portion (68 individuals) did not offer a specific explanation.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (94.5%) do not support replacing LA with dialects as the official language. This result contrasts with the previously documented limited daily use of LA (Table 10). The observed pattern illustrates the characteristic diglossic situation in the Arabic language context: the LA maintains its functions as the official and symbolic standard, while dialects serve as the primary means of daily communication. The data indicate a persistent perception of literary language as the norm ensuring supra-regional unity and formal communication.

Table 10

**Question 8 “Do you believe that dialects should replace Arabic as the official language?”**

Response	N	Proportion, %
Yes	56	5.5
No	954	94.5

Source: compiled by A.D. Haddad.

The analysis of the responses explaining the position in questions 6 “Do you think that dialects should become official languages alongside Arabic?” and 8 “Do you believe that dialects should replace Arabic as the official language?” revealed the following with results presented as absolute numbers to reflect the variety of distinct arguments: the majority of respondents position LA as the fundamental language, while dialects are perceived as derivatives (228 responses). A common statement emphasizes the presence of a large number of dialects, noting that ignorance of each of them will hinder communication between speakers of different dialects (162 people). Respondents also emphasize the importance of preserving LA (50 people) and its aesthetic qualities (38 people), while noting its unifying role among Arab countries and contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage (64 people). Some respondents drew attention to the lack of codified rules in dialects, their

limited functional sphere (lack of written form, inability to cover all aspects of life, variability and learning problems) (115 people). Some respondents associate LA with its status as the language of the Quran (26 people). A significant number of participants were unable to provide an explanation and chose the option “I don’t know” (65 people).

According to one respondent (a 21-year-old male), LA has an immutable nature, in contrast to the constant changeability of dialects. He argued that preserving and promoting LA in everyday life is crucial to maintaining Arab unity, as the adoption of dialects as official languages could exacerbate existing geopolitical fragmentation. Another respondent, a 19-year-old male, believed that linguistic heterogeneity, which is reflected in the existence of different dialects even within a single city, could lead to misunderstandings, especially regarding important official statements such as government decrees and legal acts. A 23-year-old female argued that LA has been the standard form of Arabic for thousands of years, finding the idea of its replacement by a dialect unacceptable. In contrast, a 28-year-old female believed that the importance of dialects in everyday communication is an undeniable reality that cannot be ignored or circumvented, and therefore they should be recognized as official languages. Regarding the perceived difference between individual dialects and LA, the vast majority of respondents (74%) believed that their dialect was “somewhat” different from LA. 24% of respondents considered the difference to be “significant,” while only 2% believed that their dialect was “not different at all” from LA, indicating a blurring of the boundaries between literary and dialectal forms of the language.

## Conclusion

The results of the conducted research further confirm the significant role of dialects in the daily lives of Arabic-speaking populations. However, despite the prevalence of dialects in everyday communication, the majority of respondents are unwilling to recognize them as official languages, indicating a dominant ideology surrounding the importance of LA as a symbol of cultural unity across all Arab countries. Survey results indicate that respondents under the age of 30 demonstrate good proficiency in LA, while middle-aged individuals experience difficulties communicating in it. This may be attributed to the fact that the younger generation actively studies Standard Arabic in schools and universities. The overall trend suggests a gradual decline in the quality of LA among surveyed respondents. The boundaries between dialects and LA are becoming blurred, particularly under the influence of media and globalization processes. This is evidenced by the fact that more than half of the surveyed respondents assess their dialect as differing only slightly from LA.

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